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Emotion as Collective Identity: the case of Portuguese Saudade

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"Only the Portuguese find the independent existence of Portugal an unremarkable state of affairs. To others, the most amazing thing about this amazing little country is that it exists at all." This was how the editors of Life, in 1966, decided to introduce the small Mediterranean country in the *Handbook of the Nations.* Astonished by the fact that, save for 60 years, the Portuguese have managed to avoid amalgamation with Spain, they promptly defined a Portuguese as "a man who detests Spain."[1] This passage raises three questions. First, can collective identities be defined by emotions? Second, how can emotions hold people together? Third, how can emotions be used as an analytical tool to understand collective identities' permanence?[2]

I approach these questions through Portugal's case, which illustrates how an emotion called *saudade* – not hatred or detestation, as one could infer from the *Handbook of the Nations* – has become a marker of Portuguese identity. As Kyra Giorgi acknowledges, "its importance as a cultural trope is not disputed."[3] Furthermore, there is evidence that emotional norms encouraged individuals to express their feelings of *saudade* in person and in letters. As an answer to the second question above, the practice of sharing feelings of saudade might be a reason why such a nation of traders and navigators – who could have dispersed around the world – was able to keep its cohesion and identity despite the distance. The third question, however, is here as a methodological intention.

[1] *Handbook of the Nations and International Organizations*. Life World Library. New York: Time, Inc., 1966. p.73-75.

[2] I use the expression' collective identity' in a broad sense, encompassing nation, race, ethnicity, gender, or any other concept around which a collectivity identifies itself.

[3] Kyra Giorgi. *Emotions, Language and Identity on the Margins of Europe.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. p.2.

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Nostalgia, homesickness, the joy of grief? The Portuguese are proud to affirm that no foreign word can describe such a deep feeling. However, the impossibility of translating the word *saudade* into any other language is not a creation of Romantic nineteenth-century intellectuals – a "rather bizarre invention of a Portuguese poet who was an enemy of cosmopolitanism."[4] The perception of *saudade* as an exclusively Portuguese emotion can be traced back to the fifteenth century when King D. Duarte wrote that Latin, or any other language as far as he knew, did not have a word of similar meaning.[5]

Despite its old connection with the Portuguese soul, *saudade* would assume new and ambiguous connotations in the context of the twentieth century's political and economic crises. In the 1910s, this emotion was in the core of a literary movement – *Saudosismo* – that appealed to a sentimental nationalistic expression to regenerate Portuguese past glory. Then, with the advent of the *Estado Novo*, *saudade* became part of the dictatorial regime's discourse. Hence, after the fall of the regime in 1974, the new political and cultural elites started to consider the notion of *saudade* as "politically incorrect."[6] Nevertheless, the negative opinion that the cultural elites sustain about *saudade* has not stopped this emotion from being experienced and cultivated by the Portuguese people's practices in the country and abroad.[7]

Six centuries ago, King D. Duarte anticipated modern psychological knowledge, according to which "experiences of 'social pain' (the painful feelings following social rejection, exclusion, or loss) and 'social pleasure' (the pleasurable feelings associated with feeling connected to others) should be considered fundamental emotional states."[8] He not only had a word – *suydade,* in archaic Portuguese – to describe this dual emotional state, but he also explained its origins. For D. Duarte, s*audade* belongs to the heart, not to reason. It is a feeling born from the absence of someone loved. As memories can bring more joy than sorrow for the time that is gone, *saudade* can cause as much pleasure as sadness. More importantly, even immersed in "tears and sighs," those who feel *saudade* are never apart, "because when the friend leaves, even though we feel *saudade*, he is always present."[9]

[4]João Leal. ""Saudade", La Construction d'Un Symbole: « Caractère National » Et Identité Nationale." *Ethnologie Française* 29, no. 2 (1999): 177-189.

[5]Duarte, King of Portugal, 1391-1438. *Leal Conselheiro, o Qual Fez Dom Duarte: Seguido do Livro da Ensinança de Bem Cavalgar Toda Sella*. France: J.P. Aillaud, 1842. p.151

[6]Leal, p.184

[7]See, for example, Bela Feldman-Bianco. "Multiple Layers of Time and Space: The Construction of Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism among Portuguese Immigrants." In Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton (ed). *Towards a Transnational Perspective in Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity and Nationalism Reconsidered*. New York Academy of Sciences, 1992 :145-174

[8]Naomi I. Eisenberger. "Social Pain and Social Pleasure." In: Barrett, Lisa Feldman, Lewis, Michael, and Haviland-Jones, Jeannette M., eds. *Handbook of Emotions*. New York: Guilford Publications, 2016.

[9]"*…porque o amygo quando compre de se partir, ainda que del synta suydade, […] mas sempre he presente."*

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More than a word used to state how one feels, *saudade* is an idea that the Portuguese share through interpersonal practices. In a study of the early modern Portuguese diaspora, Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert suggests that "affection and concern closed the gap of separation." The Portuguese maintained their emotional connections despite religious belonging and social provenance. As the author explains, "letters were a proxy for the flow and engagement of personal conversation."[10] These findings are compatible with the anthropological work of Mary Bouquet, for whom "one of the most striking images of life in Portugal is that of conversation." Based on the reality of the 1980s, she reveals the nature of Portuguese conversation: "the expression of concern for other people."[11] Bouquet's observation indicates a continuity in the emotional pattern of "affection and concern" found in early modern letters.

Thus, historians and anthropologists seem to agree with linguistic studies that show that "expressing and talking about emotions plays a significant role in Portuguese social life."[12] Hence, one can infer how much the emotional practice of interested conversation might have contributed to preserving the Portuguese's collective coherence and identity throughout the centuries. What those studies do not entirely explain is how some people opted for the Portuguese identity. That is the intriguing case of one particular group of early modern Portuguese diaspora: the "Portuguese Jews." Miriam Bodian argues that they reunited with the Sephardi diaspora only "in a formal, bloodless sort of way." She continues, "but in terms of the foundational myths, collective emotions, and religio-cultural patterns that made them feel at home in their new communities—no, they did not become 'Sephardim.'" As the author concludes, "they remained 'Portuguese.'"[13] This case illustrates the history of emotions' explanatory potential. By identifying emotional practices, one can get closer to understand what binds people together to the point of forging (and preserving) a collective identity. Just as the Portuguese unite around *saudade*, other collective identities may have been built – and remained robust – by cultivating other emotions, such as pride, hatred, fear, guilt. How can emotional practices define identity? There are undoubtedly countless ways to approach this question. One of them is by suggesting a theoretical model for a general mechanism. So, I offer this possible answer:

In: Duarte, King of Portugal, 1391-1438. *Leal Conselheiro, o Qual Fez Dom Duarte: Seguido do Livro da Ensinança de Bem Cavalgar Toda Sella.* France: J.P. Aillaud, 1842. p.248

[10]Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire*, 1492-1640. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.p.75

[11]Mary Bouquet. *Reclaiming English Kinship: Portuguese Refractions of British Kinship Theory*. Manchester University Press, 1993. P.169;176.

[12]Zuzanna Bułat Silva. "Saudade – a Key Portuguese Emotion." *Emotion Review* 4, no. 2 (2012): 203-211.

[13]Miriam Bodian. "Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: The Ambiguous Boundaries of Self-Definition." *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 66-80.

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In an environment that favors continuous encounters between different groups, individuals are exposed to various experiences to which they develop emotional responses. In the *long term*, beneficial responses tend to be imitated by other individuals of the group to the point of becoming part of their cultural norms. Thus, overtime time, different groups of people end by cultivating emotions that better function as responses to the stimuli to which they were exposed. When such emotional practices also promote social behaviors that foster group coherence, their collective identity becomes linked to that emotion. This model seems to fit the Portuguese case as it offers a plausible explanation not only for the centrality of *saudade* to their collective identity but also for the permanence of Portugal as a nation. I wonder how this general mechanism would help interpret other peoples and nations' collective identities.

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